

Vision of 'Ruston 21' shared

BY CASEY ARDOIN • NEWS@THENEWSSTAR.COM • AUGUST 6, 2009

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Ruston Mayor Dan Hollingsworth said Wednesday that his city's downtown "has a bright future," with opportunity to "thrive and survive."

Hollingsworth met with the The News-Star's editorial board to discuss the city's progress with Ruston 21, an in-depth plan for future growth and development in Ruston.

A main focus of the meeting was on renovating the downtown area, where efforts have already begun near Vienna Street and Railroad Avenue to make the area more accessible and attractive.

Ken Tipton, team project leader for Ruston 21, said along with downtown renovation the plan also discusses efforts to improve accessibility for bikers and pedestrians and create more living spaces in the form of downtown lofts.

"All of the pieces are already in place. We just need to connect them," he said.

Hollingsworth emphasized Ruston 21 is not just a government-run plan, but that the community plays an important role in the growth of the city.

"It's important to have the community involved," he said. "It's our city, and we wanted the community to buy into (this plan). A community that has pride has a common spirit — a belonging."

Last November more than 400 community members gathered to discuss common goals in a Community Visioning event that laid out guiding principles for Ruston 21.

Tipton said the foundation of the plan was a result of the Community Visioning day.

"The meeting cut across all demographics," he said. "Ruston as a community shares a set of values. These things gave our group a sense of perspective."

These broadly held values that form the foundation of the project include developing community character, keeping Ruston at the forefront of education, commerce and culture, maintaining a balance between growth and small-town quality of life and expanding ties with neighboring communities.

Tipton said the focus of Ruston 21 was to think of the city as a community core which encompasses Louisiana Tech University, the area between campus and downtown, the downtown area itself and outlying historic neighborhoods.

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"It's the first time that all entities have come together and thought of themselves as one core," he said. "It's like a string of pearls — individually they're wonderful, but string them together and it's magical."

In order to have a guideline and starting point for ideas, Tipton and his team looked at other similar college communities including Tyler, Texas, Fayetteville, Ark., Auburn, Ala. and Clemson, S.C.

"We did peer research of other small college towns (in order to) take advantage of other people's wisdom," he said.

Hollingsworth said a crucial part of Ruston 21 was continuing to improve education, not only with the university but also surrounding schools.

"With the leadership at Tech we see our community as a high tech community of the future," he said. "With this we must improve public education. An outstanding public school system benefits everybody."

While the plan will take several years to complete, Hollingsworth emphasized that Ruston 21 will be in place even after he moves out of the mayor's office.

"We hope by doing this that it will have legs into the future. If we can take advantage of existing opportunities, we can be a magnet for good people and jobs. I think the possibilities are endless," he said.